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Reporting vs. Advocacy in News Coverage

'Scoop' on Pope's Shooting Ignites Debate

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Claire Sterling, a controversial free-lance foreign correspondent who has spent the last several years tracking down evidence of Soviet involvement in terrorism, contacted The New York Times Magazine in May with what she hoped would be an international scoop.

Sterling had a copy of an Italian prosecutor's then-secret report that attempted to link the Bulgarian secret services to the 1981 shooting by Mehmet Ali Agca of Pope John Paul II. When Times editors, including executive editor A.M. Rosenthal, got word of this, they decided to give it more prominence.

Sterling's 5,800-word article—which said the Bulgarians hired Agca to kill the first Polish pope as part of "a plot to weaken the Solidarity movement in Poland"—was put at the top of the front page of June 10 editions of The Times and filled two full pages inside.

Her story and its handling by The Times became one of those journalistic events that provoke strong debate inside and about the media.

Some reporters, including a number at The Times, questioned whether an outside contributor who has been regarded as a crusading advocate should be appearing on the front page of such an influential newspaper. At the same time, other news organizations scrambled to check out, shoot down or advance her story.

Sterling's article also provided new ammunition for conservative academics who have criticized the media and some of the media's sources in Western intelligence agencies for not confirming their view that the Bulgarians were behind the pope's shooting.

Sterling, responding to critics, said: "I'm a reporter; I'm not a protagonist. I'm a reporter who happened to glom onto a story that I feel strongly about, and suddenly there is all this criticism about me."

The continuing controversy reveals almost as much about the news business as it does about the shooting of the pope.

This latest chapter in the media's pursuit of the story of the pope's shooting began when Marvin Kalb of NBC News broke the news about the Italian prosecutor's report on May 25. His story, televised midway through the network's evening news broadcast, said prosecutor Antonio Albano's unreleased report had concluded that "the Bulgarian secret services contracted with Agca for the organization and execution of the murder plan."

Kalb said he called other news organizations to alert them to his story. The Washington Post and other newspapers published only short wire service accounts of it and The New York Times ignored his report. "Even when a story breaks, when you guys don't want to recognize it, you just don't recognize it," Kalb complained.

Some news executives, asked about the Kalb report, said they did not react strongly because it was "sketchy," with few of the details that were later reported by Sterling. They also said NBC had appeared to play down the story.

John Lane, vice president in charge of daily news for NBC, said that on the day Kalb's report was broadcast, "We led with a story from the Persian Gulf, and we ran Marvin Kalb's piece prominently and gave it three minutes. Marvin is also keeping a close eye on the story and we will continue to update as is warranted."

Newspapers also seldom react strongly to television stories, in part because they are accustomed to seeing enterprise reporting move in the opposite direction: from newspapers to television.

Sterling said at a recent seminar here on terrorism that the Kalb report did not take the edge off her scoop for The Times.

"When I wrote the story for The New York Times, I was asked by Times editors if I could guarantee them that my story was exclusive," she said. "I said I could not guarantee that, since if I got it, someone else could get it. But, I said I do think I can practically guarantee it because nobody else is looking for it."

"Although three weeks elapsed between the time I got the manuscript and ... the publication in The Times, nothing appeared to ruffle the tempers of Abe Rosenthal and other editors at The Times."

Craig R. Whitney, assistant managing editor of The Times, said recently that "we saw that it was essentially a scoop, a report of the Italian prosecutor's case which we had been waiting for. And since she had it, had the text of it, we thought we should run it."

He said that The Times took care to identify Sterling as author of "The Terror Network," a book accusing the Soviets of nurturing terrorists throughout the world, as well as a recent book on the attempted assassination of the pope. In a note accompanying the story, Times editors also described Sterling as "a longtime American foreign correspondent [who] has been investigating terrorism and the attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II for several years."

"But it wasn't Claire Sterling's thesis that we were running," said Whitney. "It was a clear report on the prosecutor's case."

Rather than have a Times news staff member write about Sterling's report, he added, the editors decided to print her article with brackets around Sterling's comments to separate them from the contents of the report. Whitney said this bracketing was designed "to be as clear to our readers as we could about who was saying what: 'Here's the report and here's what she is saying about it.'"

Others, however, challenged The Times' use of a writer who appears to have strong feelings about this